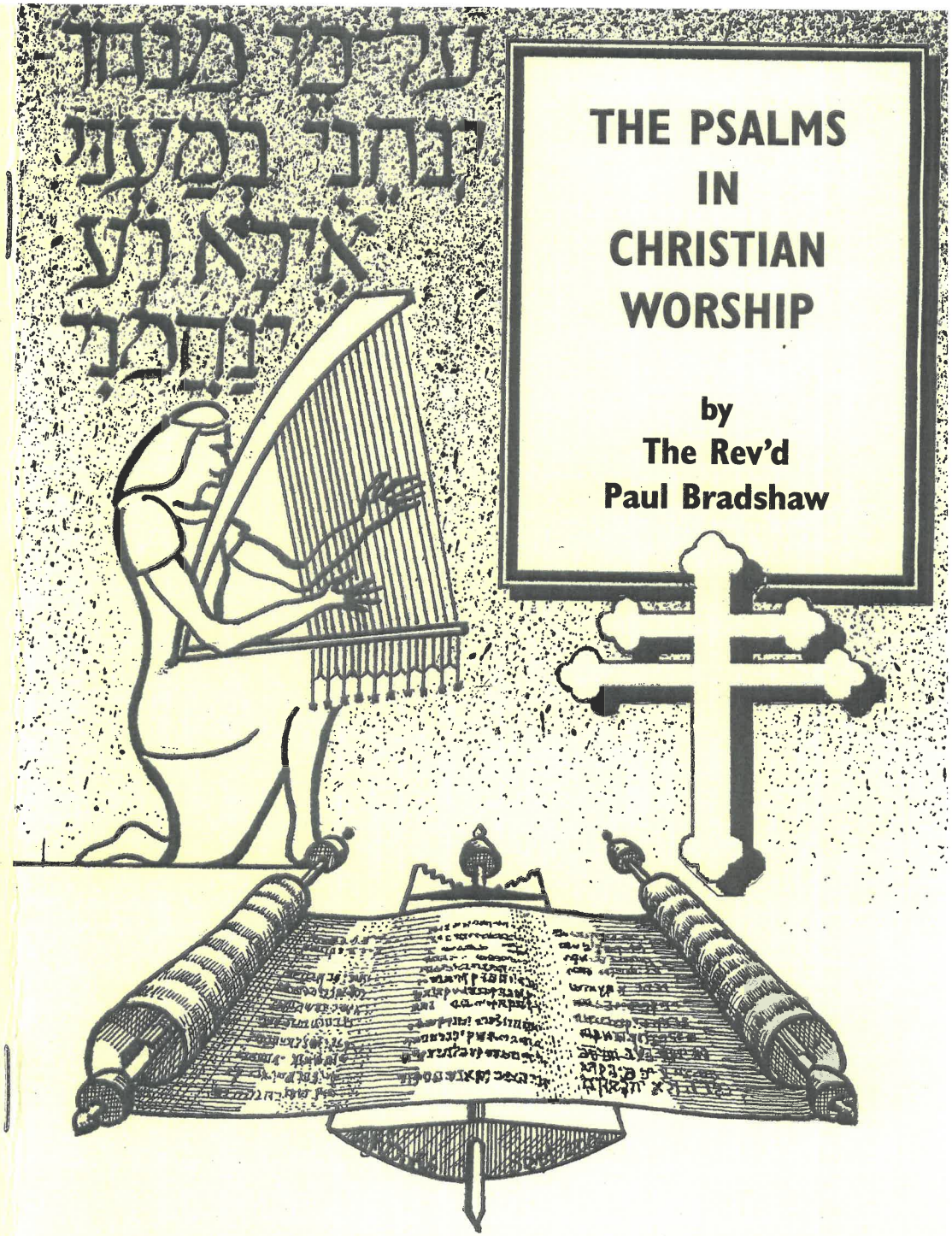

THE PSALMS IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

by
The Rev'd
Paul Bradshaw

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GUILD OF CHURCH MUSICIANS STUDY GUIDE No. C10

FOREWORD

from The Revd Canon Alan Luff,
sometime Warden of the Guild of Church Musicians

In commending this new series of Study Guides to the members of the Guild I commend it also to the wider company of those who lead the worship of our churches and those who like to take an intelligent interest in what is said and sung and played Sunday by Sunday in them.

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THE PSALMS IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

by

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Professor of Liturgy, University of Notre Dame

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Guild of Church Musicians
Study Guide No. 10

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1. The use of the Psalms in early Judaism

It is often said that the Psalter was the hymn-book of the Jewish Temple and that psalms were sung in Jewish synagogue worship in Jesus' day, so that he would have been very accustomed to using them. Some earlier scholars even went so far as to suggest that there was once a triennial lectionary cycle for the Psalter at the Sabbath afternoon service, corresponding to that for the proclamation of the Law, in which the psalms were read through in order. The historical evidence, however, does not offer strong support for any of these claims. If psalms were used in the Temple liturgy, it was only a very tiny selection from the canonical collection that we now have. The Mishnah (the first systematic assembly of rabbinic judgements made at the end of the second century of the Christian era) lists a psalm for each of the seven days of the week (24, 48, 82, 94, 81, 93, 92) which it says had been sung by the Levites at the Temple sacrifices (*Tamid* 7.4), and it states that at the important festivals the *Hallel* (Pss. 113-118) accompanied the sacrifices, but beyond that we have no ancient testimony to the use of other psalms there. There is also a complete lack of any documentary evidence for the use of them in synagogue worship in Jesus' day. Indeed, a growing number of scholars now doubt that there was a regular Sabbath synagogue liturgy as such in the first century, and hold that the references in the New Testament are rather to a weekly gathering for the study of the Jewish Law that Jesus and his disciples attended – something more like a class than a service, which is unlikely to have included psalm-singing.

Moreover, while the *Hallel* seems to have been taken over into the domestic Passover meal at quite an early date, and apparently also into the festal synagogue liturgy, the first mention of the adoption of the daily psalms in the synagogue is not until the eighth century. Nor are there any earlier references to the use of other psalms in the synagogue, except for an enigmatic statement in the Mishnah concerning 'those who complete a *hallel* every day' (*Meg.* 17b). The later Babylonian Talmud identifies this *hallel* as *pesukei*

assemblies as prophetic readings, like other books of the Old Testament. 1 Cor. 14.26 includes a 'psalm' among the verbal contributions that individual participants might bring to a Christian ministry of the word, and Eph. 5.19 speaks of believers 'addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs....' The word 'psalm', however, could be used in a more general sense at the time, and so we cannot be sure that canonical psalms were included here as well as psalms and hymns composed by Christians themselves, but it seems likely that they were, given the high regard for the Psalter displayed by the New Testament writers. It is interesting to note that, like the Jewish example cited earlier, both these New Testament passages may well be referring to occasions connected with a meal rather than a formal liturgy of the word: 1 Cor. 14 probably belongs to the same context as 1 Cor. 11, the Christian eucharistic supper, and Eph. 5.18 instructs the readers not to 'get drunk with wine' but to 'be filled with the Spirit', thus implying that some drinking might take place then. The expression 'addressing one another' also suggests a solo performance by individuals, again as in Philo's account.

The same prophetic/christological method of interpreting psalms was continued by Christian theologians and preachers in succeeding centuries, and also left its mark on later liturgical practice. By the late fourth century if not earlier, a selected psalm, or a portion of a psalm, had become a regular element in the liturgy of the word within the eucharistic rite. It was apparently viewed as part of God's word to the people rather than as a song in response to the other readings, and was read/chanted by one voice alone to the listening assembly. Augustine on occasion actually describes it as a 'reading' (*Serm.* 165; 176), and the diary of the fourth-century pilgrim Egeria states that at Jerusalem on Good Friday the readings were 'all about the things that Jesus suffered: first the psalms on this subject, then the Apostles which concern it, then passages from the Gospels. Thus they read the prophecies about what the Lord would suffer, and the Gospels about what he did suffer.'

3. Psalms as hymns in early Christianity

Since the New Testament evidence is so limited, we have no way of knowing whether the psalms might have had a regular place in formal services of the word alongside other prophetic readings from the Old Testament, or whether they were only used occasionally in place of such readings, or whether they belonged exclusively to the informal ministry of the word in connection with Christian community meals. Nor does the evidence from the second and third centuries increase our knowledge very much. The only explicit reference to psalms in a formal ministry of the word during this period occurs in a description of a Montanist service led by a woman, given by the North African Christian writer Tertullian at the end of the second century (*De anima* 9.4). While the same practice may also have existed in the Catholic tradition of the day, we cannot automatically conclude that this was so, nor even that by the word 'psalms' Tertullian here necessarily means biblical psalms, since the term tended to be used quite loosely by patristic writers. The third-century Syrian church order known as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* states that the paschal vigil took place 'with readings from the prophets, and with the gospels and with psalms'(5.19.1), but again we do not know how widespread this was, or whether the liturgical use of the psalms was restricted to this one occasion in the year.

On the other hand, in addition to the New Testament passages cited above that might imply that both canonical psalms and other compositions were sung by individuals at informal ministries of the word in connection with Christian community meals, we have firmer testimony to this practice among early Christians from Tertullian, who states – in terms again reminiscent of Philo – that at the end of the supper 'after the washing of hands and the lighting of lamps, each is invited to stand in the middle and sing a hymn to God, from the holy scriptures or of his own composition as he is able' (*Apologeticum* 39.18). This appears to suggest that no special preference was accorded to the canonical

texts over non-canonical ones. Tertullian is also the first person to reveal that this use of psalms and hymns in a communal meal context was apparently also beginning to spread among the more pious to the regular times of daily prayer when these were observed by a group rather than by individuals on their own. He states that 'those who are more diligent in praying are accustomed to include in their prayers Alleluia and this type of psalm, with the ending of which those who are present may respond'(*De oratione* 27), by which he seems to mean that it was the psalms that already included an Alleluia refrain in their text (e.g., Pss. 148-150) which were being selected for this purpose, and that the group sang this response to the individual's chanting of each verse – the method of psalmody known as 'responsorial'.

It is probable that this use of psalms as hymns has its roots in the use of psalms as prophecy. First-century Christians would doubtless have chosen to sing to the community those psalms which they thought demonstrated that Christ was the expected Messiah, having fulfilled what had been prophesied in the scriptures, and the assembled community would probably have responded to each verse with an acclamation of praise. But Tertullian implies that it was the praise character of the psalm rather than its prophetic content which governed the selection in his day, and certainly by the fourth century, when the sources enable us to identify which particular psalms were being sung in the daily public worship of the Church, any former connection with the prophetic usage has been lost along the way. It is not the obviously christological ones that constitute the regular core here, but instead psalms inviting praise which include within them the Alleluia response (Pss. 148-150 in the morning), and also those appropriate to the particular hour of the day (e.g., Ps. 141 in the evening, because of its reference in verse 2 to 'the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice').

Nevertheless, the use of the responsorial method of psalmody for these psalms clearly implies an affiliation to the older role of the psalm as prophetic reading. For although the psalms are now called 'hymns', it was actually the refrain, and not the psalm

itself, that constituted the song of praise to God, and the same method of rendering the psalms was also employed for those that were included in the eucharistic ministry of the word. The fourth-century theologian John Chrysostom not only reveals that a selected psalm verse and not just a simple 'Alleluia' could now be used as the refrain, but he also explains its significance as part of a dialogue, the verses of the psalm being God's word to the believers, the refrain their response to that word: 'Do not then think that you have come here simply to say the words, but when you make the response, consider that response to be a covenant. For when you say, "Like the hart desires the watersprings, my soul desires you, O God", you make a covenant with God. You have signed a contract without paper or ink; you have confessed with your voice that you love him more than all, that you prefer nothing to him, and that you burn with love for him...' (*Expositio in Psalmos* 41.5).

Two further things need to be noted about the use of psalms in this fourth-century tradition. First, it was still just as selective as the earlier use appears to have been, and perhaps even more so: only a very few psalms were used, and most of these were repeated every single day. Second, there is now a clear dominance of biblical texts over non-biblical material, which came about as the result of the need to combat heresy: since heretical groups were propagating their beliefs through the medium of their hymns, other Christians began to view all non-canonical compositions with considerable suspicion. The only sure way for them to avoid unwittingly uttering heretical sentiments, therefore, seemed to be to restrict themselves to songs taken from the Scriptures, which, as the inspired word of God, were free from all taint of distrust. St Basil, for example, contrasts the canonical psalms as 'the songs of the Spirit' with ecclesiastical compositions, which he describes as 'the words of mere humans' (*Ep.* 207.4). Consequently, only a very few well established non-canonical hymns – most notably *Gloria in excelsis* ('Glory to God in the highest') and *Phos hilaron* ('O Gladsome Light') – survived in later usage from what must formerly have been an enormous wealth of creative contributions.

4. The Psalter as the summary of scripture

It was among the ascetics and early monastic communities of the fourth century, and especially those in the Egyptian desert, that the psalms came to assume a position of pre-eminence within the books of the Old Testament and that for the first time the whole 150 psalms came to be used within regular worship. While it appears that the early Pachomian communities of Upper Egypt read passages from a variety of biblical books in their daily worship and did not give any special place to the psalms, other groups singled out the Psalter from the rest of the scriptures, and encouraged their members to commit its contents to memory and recite the psalms constantly, both during formal times of daily prayer and also throughout the rest of their waking hours, usually in their biblical sequence and without any regard for their appropriateness to specific hours and occasions. Several sayings of the desert fathers tell of individuals completing the whole Psalter in the course of a single night. While such stories certainly go far beyond normal practice, they clearly illustrate the ideal towards which the serious Christian ascetic was expected to strive.

It has sometimes been thought that the psalms were here functioning as a form of prayer. But that is not the case. The primary sources frequently speak of prayer *and* psalmody, and reveal that the characteristic way of using the psalms in this tradition was to alternate the saying or chanting of a psalm with a period of silent prayer, whether recited by individuals alone during their daily labours, by groups of ascetics gathered together informally, or by organized communities in their regular times of prayer. When two or more people prayed together, only one of them said the psalm and the other(s) listened to it. Then there followed a period of silent reflection on the word of God and interior prayer for spiritual growth – sometimes being concluded with the Lord's Prayer or a collect – before the next psalm was said, followed by another period of silent prayer, and so on. Thus early monks did not pray the psalms: they listened to them as God's word and their individual meditative prayer

arose out of them. In that sense, they were merely continuing the tradition of treating the psalms as readings which had been begun by the earliest Christians. The only difference was that they were now using the whole Psalter. This practice was true not only of the Egyptian tradition but also of ascetics in Syria. For example, Theodoret of Cyrus describes how Julian of Abiadene (c. 350) instructed his disciples 'to go out into the desert in pairs at dawn, and while one knelt to offer to the Master the worship due to him, the other was to stand and chant fifteen psalms of David; and then they were to change roles, the one standing to chant, the other kneeling on the ground to worship. And they continued doing this from morning until evening' (*Historia religiosa* 2.5).

Why those who took to the deserts should have shown such an overwhelming preference for psalms above all other scripture for this purpose has been a source of puzzlement for scholars. But perhaps the answer lies in the prophetic/christological interpretation described earlier. From the third century onwards, apparently under the influence of the exegetical method adopted by the theologian Origen from classical literature, a christological interpretation was gradually extended to encompass virtually all the psalms, although in many cases requiring quite a strained exegesis of the text. The words of the psalms were understood either as addressed by the Church to Christ, or as speaking about Christ, or as the voice of the Christ himself. Indeed, even those texts that referred explicitly to God were commonly interpreted as really meaning the divine Christ. Origen's ideas exercised a strong influence over the spirituality of the desert fathers, and hence it is likely that his christological exegesis of the psalms would have commended itself to the early ascetics, whose fundamental aim was to conform their lives to the pattern of Christ. What better way could there be to do that, therefore, than by meditating upon the mind of Christ as revealed in the psalms?

Yet, whatever the original cause for their adoption, the psalms soon came to be regarded in this tradition as much more than christological prophecy. The Psalter was thought to encapsulate all that the rest of the Old Testament had to offer. Thus while spiritual

leaders certainly continued to acknowledge the prophetic dimension of the Psalter, they made much greater claims for it, asserting it to be a summary of all Christian teaching and the remedy for all spiritual ills. St Basil typifies the attitudes of his contemporaries:

> Now the Prophets teach some things, the Historians other things, the Law still other things, and the form of advice of the Proverbs something else, but the Book of Psalms encompasses what is valuable from them all. It prophesies what is to come; it recalls history; it legislates for life; it gives practical advice; and it is in general a common treasury of good teachings, carefully finding what is suitable for each person. For it heals the old wounds of souls; it brings swift recovery to the recently wounded; it treats what is diseased; it preserves what is pure; and as far as possible it takes away the passions that in many ways dominate souls in the life of human beings. And it does this with a certain diligent persuasion and sweetness that engender a moderate disposition (*Homilia in psalmum* 1.1).

Those who viewed the Psalter from this perspective did not lose sight of the fact that the psalms were hymnic in form. But they still argued that the teaching function was primary, and that God had deliberately arranged for the psalms to take this form in order to make learning more pleasurable for human beings:

> When the Holy Spirit saw that the human race was with difficulty led toward virtue, and that because of our inclination toward pleasure we neglected an upright life, what did he do? He mixed sweetness of melody with the teachings so that by the pleasantness and softness of the sound heard we might receive without realizing it the benefit of the words, just like wise physicians, who often smear the cup with honey when giving the fastidious rather bitter medicines to drink. Therefore he devised these harmonious melodies of the psalms for us, so that those who are children in age or even those who are young in their ways might appear to be singing but in reality be training their souls (*ibid.*).

5. The traditions combined: psalmody as praise

We have suggested that a distinction should be drawn between the use of psalms in 'desert' spirituality, where the whole Psalter was recited in its biblical order as the basis for silent individual meditation, and the use in the fourth-century ecclesiastical daily offices, where selected psalms were sung by a cantor as a proclamation of God's word, to which the community responded with a refrain expressing their praise of God. This distinction, however, rapidly became blurred, and in later centuries disappeared altogether, with the result that in both monastic and secular circles in the West the chanting of psalms came to be thought of as itself an act of praise to God.

Two factors seem to have been chiefly responsibility for this development. First, there was the practice of fourth-century Cappadocian and Syrian monastic communities, often called by scholars 'urban monastic' because, in contrast to the desert monastic traditions, they lived in towns and cities in close association with the Church around them. These communities eventually came to include in their daily worship both the selective psalmody of the daily offices of the Church with which they were familiar and the consecutive psalmody of the desert tradition And it was their hybrid practice that became the foundation for the worship patterns of virtually all later forms of the daily office. Their mingling of the two traditions effectively obscured the previous contrast between the psalms as scripture and selected psalms as hymns, and because monastic spirituality exercised an enormous influence on the Church around, it was not long before these ideas penetrated beyond religious communities and many more psalms began to be employed in public worship.

The second principal factor was that from the early fifth century onwards communities of monks were given responsibility for maintaining the prayer and sacramental life of churches in the city of Rome. Even though the external *form* of their daily offices

of psalmody may have remained unchanged, yet in this new context their *function* was effectively transformed from the spiritual advancement of the individual members of the community to the celebration of the praise of the Church. Moreover, this Roman institution provided a model that was imitated by others elsewhere.

Thus monasticism gave to the wider Church a more extended use of psalmody than it had previously known, but the Church eventually gave back to monasticism the idea of the psalms as a proclamation followed by a sung refrain of praise rather than just as food for individual private meditation. It also, in turn, encouraged monastic communities to take greater cognizance of the hymnic character of the psalms and to introduce more elaborate forms of their performance. So in time even in monasticism psalm-singing came to be thought of not only as a pedagogical exercise but also as an act of praise – not just God's word addressed to the worshippers but the voice of the Church to God

In this way Christians came to accept that the whole Psalter and not just selected psalms could be used for the praise of God. But what of the difficulty that not all of the psalms actually expressed words of praise – indeed that some of them were prayers of desperation and others called down fire upon the psalmist's enemies? This did not present a serious obstacle to this new understanding, because it was thought that it was the *act* of psalm-singing rather than what the *text* of the psalms themselves said that was pleasing to God: we chant the psalms because God likes to hear them. We can see this attitude emerging in the *Rule of the Master*, a forerunner of the *Rule of Benedict*, which was written in the late fifth or early sixth century:

> So great must be the reverential seriousness and the manner of chanting the psalms that the Lord listens more lovingly than we say them; as Scripture declares: 'You take delight in the coming of the morning, and in the evening', and again: 'Sing the psalms to him joyfully and skillfully, for direct is the word of the Lord', and again: 'Exult in him with fear', and again: 'Sing to the Lord wisely'. Therefore if it commands the singing of psalms to be done wisely and with fear, the person singing them should stand with body motionless and head bowed, and should sing praises to the Lord with composure, since he is indeed performing his service before the Godhead, as the prophet teaches when he says: 'In the presence of the angels I will sing your praise'.
>
> So the singer of psalms must always be careful not to let his attention wander elsewhere, lest God say to us when our mind has strayed to some other thought: 'This people honors me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me', and lest it likewise be said of us: 'With their mouth they blessed and in their heart they cursed', and lest when we praise God with the tongue alone, we admit God only to the doorway of our mouth while we bring in and lodge the devil in the dwelling of our heart (*Rule of the Master*, ch. 47; English translation by Luke Eberle [Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1977], pp. 205-206).

It is true that this chapter of the rule, like other sources of the period, later goes on to offer a second and more traditionally monastic reason why the singer should pay attention to every single verse of the psalm, 'because if each verse is noted the soul derives profit for salvation and therein finds all it seeks, for "the psalm says everything for edification"; as the prophet declares: "I shall sing and understand in the way of integrity, when you come to me".' Yet it is clear from the rest of the chapter that praise has succeeded edification as the primary purpose for the use of psalms, and that what makes the psalm acceptable to God as praise is not the words that are spoken but the attitude and intention of the singer.

As a result of this change of function, it was inevitable that less importance would be accorded to the silent prayer that came between the psalms. The *Rule of the Master* directed that these periods of silence should always be kept short, to avoid the risk of any of the community falling asleep or being tempted to evil thoughts

(ch. 48). The *Rule of Benedict* echoed all the above exhortations, although expressing them more succinctly and giving as the reason for brevity in prayer that 'we are not to imagine that our prayers will be heard because we use many words' (chs. 19-20).

Thus the distinction between the psalm itself as the word of God and the act of praise actually being in the sung refrain after each verse, or the prayer being in the silence following the psalm, gradually began to be lost. In the light of all this, it is not surprising to find that the period of silence between psalms eventually disappeared altogether in later western usage, and that the usual method of psalm-singing itself changed. Already by the late fourth century, in an effort to relieve the monotony of the continuous use of the responsorial method, especially during the long night vigils, a variation had emerged – antiphonal psalmody – in which the assembly was divided into two choirs that took it in turns to sing the response to the verses sung by the soloist, or sometimes by two soloists alternating the verses. Moreover, the *Gloria Patri*, 'Glory be to the Father…', was added as a doxological conclusion to antiphonal psalms, though not to the older responsorial psalmody. By the ninth century, however, the two choirs themselves, instead of a soloist, began to sing the verses alternately, and the response (or antiphon, as it came to be called) was relegated merely to the beginning and end of the psalm.

Nevertheless, psalms were not always thought of as praise. They could also be used as expressions of penitence and even of intercession. Once again, the original practice was to select appropriate psalms for this purpose, ones which themselves spoke of contrition (as, for example, Ps. 51) or articulated petition. Yet when the idea took hold that it was not what the words themselves of a psalm might say but the act of singing/saying the psalm which made it acceptable to God, then the need to select an appropriate psalm-text became less crucial: any psalm would do, and the more psalms one said, the greater the penitence expressed or the more effective the intercession. One might go so far as to say that psalms simply became the accepted currency for divine-human interchange:

their value lay not in their intrinsic merit but solely in the fact that God was thought to favour them. God could just as easily have preferred the performance of some other form of religious activity, but because he apparently liked to hear psalms, he could in that way be paid what was due to him in praise, be repaid what was owed to him in penitence, or be induced to grant the desires of the supplicants. In short, the psalms were no longer used *in* Christian prayer but *as* Christian prayer.

6. The psalms in the Middle Ages

All this is not to say that the tradition of choosing suitable psalms for particular occasions entirely disappeared from the Christian tradition in the West. Alongside the developments just described, liturgical rites still often retained psalm texts which had originally been assigned because of their appropriateness to the particular liturgical action (for example, at weddings or funerals) or to the season of the Church's year, and as new rites and feast days emerged, they too were assigned suitable texts. In the eucharist, in addition to the psalm in the liturgy of the word described earlier (which became known in the Roman tradition as the 'gradual' psalm because it was originally sung from the steps), other psalms had been added to the rite at quite an early date to provide a musical accompaniment to what were originally somewhat protracted periods of silent activity: the processional entrance of the ministers at the beginning (the introit), the preparation of the eucharistic elements in the middle of the service (the offertory) and the distribution of the consecrated bread and wine to the people (the communion). Like the gradual psalm, the psalms chosen for these actions varied according to the liturgical year, but unlike the gradual, they were each concluded with the *Gloria Patri*, and a verse of the psalm itself was not always used as the antiphon, but it might be chosen from another psalm, from another book of the Bible, or even from a non-biblical source. Later in the Middle Ages, as low mass celebrated by just one priest alone replaced the high mass with many ministers as the more common form of service, there was no longer the need for a long chant at the entry, nor for the offertory and communion chants when the priest was usually the only one to receive communion, so all these psalms shrank to just the antiphon, one verse of the psalm, the *Gloria Patri*, and the repetition of the antiphon, sung by the choir if there was one, but if not, just recited by the priest himself. The gradual, too, tended to contract to no more than the refrain and a single verse, again sung by the choir or said by the priest without any congregational participation. Sometimes this abbreviation

resulted in the verses that had originally prompted the choice of a particular psalm being no longer included. For example, Ps. 72 was selected as the introit for the Feast of the Epiphany because of the reference in verses 10-11 to eastern kings bringing gifts, but in its truncated form only verse 1 was left.

Furthermore, although the early monastic founders had intended that the recitation of the whole Psalter in a specified period of time (for instance, once a week according to the *Rule of Benedict*) should form the backbone of the daily office, in later practice this tended not to happen. Even Benedict was forced to give quite complicated directions for the arrangement of the psalms in his form of the daily office because he wanted some psalms to be said every day in their traditional place (such as Pss. 148-150 at the morning office) and others to be said once a week, again in a traditional selected cycle (such as the use of parts of the long Ps. 119 at offices during the day), but neither of these two groups to be duplicated in the consecutive round of the rest of the psalms throughout the week. At first in the monastic traditions, this regular round was only superseded on very rare occasions by psalms that were selected for their appropriateness to a particular feast day. However, in the later Middle Ages this monastic purity gradually broke down as 'proper' psalms for feasts were increasingly substituted for the regular psalms of the day, with the result that there were few days in the year on which festal psalms did not intervene, and hardly ever a week in which the full round of 150 psalms were used.

7. The psalms in Anglican usage

With the advent of the Reformation, the fourth-century return to the canonical psalms was repeated. In the course of the Middle Ages there had been a great flowering of hymnody. This was looked upon with deep distrust by many of the Reformers, who saw it as harbouring erroneous doctrine and preferred to return to the safety of *sola scriptura*, 'scripture alone'. While Luther was content merely to base many of the German hymns that he wrote upon psalms, the Psalter itself – in the vernacular, albeit in metrical version – became the hymn book of the Reformed tradition. But once again such scriptural purity did not last. Many metrical versions became instead paraphrases of the original psalm, introducing an element of subjective interpretation and sometimes explicit Christianization to the text, as for example in the version of Psalm 72 by Isaac Watts (1674-1748), which begins, 'Jesus shall reign where'er the sun/Doth his successive journeys run'. Eventually hymns having only a tenuous connection with biblical passages made an appearance alongside the traditional metrical psalms, and often displaced them altogether.

Only in the Church of England, therefore, among the churches of the Reformation, was there a return to the extensive use of the biblical psalms as such in daily worship. Indeed, only in the Church of England was a daily office prescribed as obligatory for the clergy and desirable for the laity. Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury responsible for compiling the first Anglican Prayer Book in 1549, drew up a pattern that was very monastic in character. In his preface to the book, he complained that while in ancient times all the psalms had been used in daily worship, 'now of late time a few of them have been daily said (and oft repeated) and the rest utterly omitted'. His scheme therefore used every single one of the canonical psalms in morning and evening prayer over the period of a month, beginning with Psalm 1 on the first morning of the each month and ending with Psalm 150 on the thirtieth day, with adjustments being made for those months which

were of different length. While this cycle was extremely simple to use, it made no attempt to ensure that psalms referring to particular times of day, morning or evening, were actually used at those hours, still less that appropriate psalms were used on particular days of the week or at particular seasons of the year. The 1549 Prayer Book provided 'proper psalms' for only four days in the whole year – Christmas Day, Easter Day, Ascension Day, and Whitsunday (Ash Wednesday and Good Friday being added in the 1662 revision). It was not until the twentieth century that proper psalms were provided for all Sundays and holy days in the Church of England.

Suitable psalms were prescribed for some other services (e.g., marriage and funerals), in the 1549 Prayer Book and also for the service of Holy Communion. Although the gradual, offertory, and communion were entirely swept away (the offertory being replaced by sentences taken from other parts of the Bible that referred to almsgiving), the introit was retained and a full psalm (although without antiphon) was once more assigned to each Sunday and festival in the year. However, in the 1552 revision, this too was eliminated.

The intention seems to have been that the congregation would participate in the saying or singing of the psalms, but as very few were able to read or to afford to purchase an expensive prayer book (and copies were not provided for all the worshippers by the parish as they have tended to be in recent times), this aim was largely frustrated, and the psalms were generally recited by the priest and/or the parish clerk. However, popular participation in psalmody was afforded by metrical Psalters, which were easier to memorize and sing. Following the Continental examples, an English collection was published by Thomas Sternhold around the time of the issue of the first Prayer Book. His first edition contained only nineteen of the psalms and the second had thirty-seven. Shortly afterwards Sternhold died, but his work was continued by John Hopkins, with a complete version of all the psalms appearing in 1562. Their use received official sanction at the beginning of the reign of Elizabeth I, when the 1559 Royal Injunctions stated that 'it may be permitted that in

the beginning or in the end of the common prayers, either at morning or at evening, there may be sung an hymn or such like song to the praise of Almighty God, in the best sort of melody and music that may be conveniently devised'. In 1696 Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady published another metrical version of the Psalter, which became known as the New Version, to distinguish it from the Old Version of Sternhold and Hopkins, and both continued in use until the middle of the nineteenth century, when they were superseded by hymnbooks, which nonetheless contained some of their psalms.

The singing of the biblical psalm-texts as such, therefore, tended to be restricted to cathedrals and collegiate churches with professional choirs, and it was there that Anglican chant flourished, and it did not really extend beyond that until the development of surpliced parish church choirs in the late nineteenth century.

8. The use of psalms today

While the Anglican cycle of daily psalmody retained its popularity in choral foundations, in the course of the twentieth century it was felt to be unduly burdensome and spiritually deadening by an increasing number of clergy reciting morning and evening prayer alone or in small groups, and not a practice that they would want to commend to lay people. In the various processes of liturgical revision that began to take place throughout the Anglican Communion in the second half of the century, therefore, there was a tendency to try to relieve the burden by spreading out the cycle of psalmody over a longer period than a month, in some cases extending it as far as three months. Since the number of verses to be said on any occasion was now much less, it was hoped that the burden would feel lighter. But for many, this was only sugar-coating a bitter pill; it did not deal with the root cause of the problem, which was the unimaginative use of all the psalms (or nearly all – sometimes the 'cursing' psalms were now omitted from the cycle) in their biblical order. Although for other services, and especially the eucharist, the use of appropriate psalms for particular occasions was once again being encouraged, yet in the daily offices the underlying philosophy still seemed to be that in the end *content* was not what mattered: it was the *action* of singing the psalm and the particular *intention* of the singer that rendered it a vehicle for praise, for penitence, or for intercession. This did not really do justice to psalms as part of the word of God, and was also at variance with how hymns were used. Most people would not dream of working through a hymn book in numerical order in the course of the liturgical year, or think that it did not matter if we sang Christmas carols at Easter or Easter hymns in Lent, or believe that the best method of hymn-singing was always to alternate the verses between two halves of the congregation. Why then do something like that with psalms?

The first Anglican office book to attempt to tackle this problem in a thoroughgoing way was the semi-official *Celebrating Common Prayer* (Cassell, London 1992), drawn up by the European

Province of the Anglican Franciscans and made available by them to the wider public. Here, although most of the 150 psalms were still used, they were distributed in a more appropriate manner in the daily services, according to their content and character. Each of the psalms was also provided with an optional psalm-prayer, which might be said at the end. This restored an ancient custom, picking out and developing a theme from the psalm, with the intention of enriching its use. In the Church of England's new official interim provision for the daily office, this way of distributing the psalms has been adopted for the principal seasons of the Church's year, with a consecutive arrangement being retained for the remainder of the year, in the hope that use of this hybrid form may clarify whether there is a strong preference in the Church of England for one or the other method. It is also intended that the psalms will be provided not only with psalm-prayers but also with suitable optional antiphons or refrains which will further help to bring out their meaning and restore the possibility of adopting the ancient dialogical use of the Psalter.

9. The future?

Lingering medieval attitudes towards the use of psalms often contribute to a lack of sensitivity on the part of those responsible for deciding what psalms shall be used in worship and how they are to be performed, as well as to the confusion of those who are expected to participate in that psalmody. If we are to use psalms more intelligently in our worship in the future, we need first of all to distinguish between different sorts of psalms and use them according to their individual contents, whether as hymns of praise, as prayers, as christological poems, or as scriptural lections. While some psalms naturally lend themselves to appropriation as the hymns and prayers of the Christian community (as, for example, Pss. 51, 148-150), and can be used in this way together with other scriptural canticles, other psalms are less suitable for use on the lips of Christians to address to God. What, for example, are we to do with Psalm 22 ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?') or Psalm 110 ('The LORD says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool"')? Both these have been so coloured by a christological reading within the New Testament itself and ever since that it is really quite impossible to detach them from that interpretation. Such psalms as these should not be employed as though they were our words addressed to God, but rather as God's word addressed to us. The same is also true of a number of other psalms that do not lend themselves to a christological interpretation. Psalm 37, for instance ('Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers'), may contain much that is valuable and true about the human relationship to God, but it is hardly an appropriate vehicle for expressing direct praise or petition. These psalms can certainly still find a place in Christian worship, but as a part of God's word to us, to which worshippers may respond either with a vocal refrain or with a period of silent meditation.

Then we need to take a close look at the words of the psalm, and not only ask *when* it would be appropriate to use it but also *how*? All too often the decision as to whether to sing or say a psalm

responsorially or antiphonally or in some other way is usually made on the grounds of variety ('We did the last one responsorially, so let's do something different with this one') or of musical preference, and not on the basis of the contents of the psalm itself.

If we consider the distinction between psalms that we see as God's word to us and psalms that we see as our words to God, it is obviously going to be very hard for people to understand a psalm as addressed to us if we all recite it together in unison, or even if one half of the congregation does the odd-numbered verses and the other side the even-numbered ones. Surely, such a psalm calls out for a solo voice to which the others listen, and perhaps respond with an appropriate refrain. It may also be a help in making this distinction between the different functions of psalms if we ask people to sit for this type of psalm and conversely to stand in order to say or sing psalms that are intended as our words to God. If a psalm is very lengthy, it may call for several lectors or cantors to be used in succession for different sections of the psalm in order to sustain interest. If the psalm itself has different voices within it, then it really demands that different people say or sing those parts in order to communicate its meaning, which remains hidden when every verse is performed in exactly the same way. Similarly, different parts of a psalm may require quite different treatment from one another, as the character of the text changes.

The choice and use of refrains or responses is a crucial element in an intelligent approach to psalmody. We do not have to put a refrain automatically after every verse, or even after every second or third verse; indeed such a mechanical and insensitive approach to a psalm text can be destructive of its meaning. We need to insert a refrain only where it makes sense. And we need to choose an appropriate refrain, not automatically pick the first verse as the refrain, regardless of what it says, as though any verse would do. Nor need we insist that the refrain has to be taken out of the particular psalm that we are using. Why not a verse from another psalm, or even from somewhere else in Scripture, if that helps to make the best sense for the psalm in its particular context?

Unless we take serious steps to use psalms liturgically in ways that bring out their true meaning rather than obscure it, we shall never succeed in introducing many worshippers to the value of psalmody, and another part of the Church's rich spiritual heritage will be lost. It is not self-evident to those who enter our services that saying or singing psalms is a good thing to do, and without some explanation of their purpose accompanied by a way of saying or singing them that coheres closely with the explanation, we shall generally not persuade them of it. For if we say that psalms can be made to mean whatever we want them to mean, we have added yet another layer to our topsy-turvy ecclesiastical world that seems to bear no relation to the reality that people experience in the rest of their lives, and we have also forgotten the words of St Paul – which the early monastic fathers were also fond of quoting – 'I will sing with the spirit, but I will also sing with the mind' (1 Cor. 14.15).

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